

Law or Grace - New Cloth and New Wine
Discovering the Heart of God through Jesus' Parables
Mark 2:18-22
September 2, 2018

¹⁸ Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"

¹⁹ Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

²¹ "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. ²² And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins." Mark 2:18-22 (NIV)

Our parable(s) this morning are actually the first ones found in the gospel accounts of Jesus' life here on earth. While they are often referred to as two separate ones; "New cloth on an old garment," and "New wine in old wineskins," they come back to back in all three of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke), and they have pretty much the same meaning, so we are going to consider them as one. They also come after a couple very significant events at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, which helps to support their meaning.

First, we have Jesus healing a paralytic and "forgiving his sins" (Mark 2:1-12). The Jewish teachers were okay with Jesus healing the man from his paralysis, but who was he to forgive the man his sins? It was blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins.

Then we have Jesus calling Levi, the tax collector (Mark 2:13-17). Tax collectors were considered sinners by the Jewish leaders. And to top it off not only did Jesus call Levi to follow him, then he went to Levi's house and had dinner with him, and Levi's friends, who were also tax collectors and sinners! Preposterous!!

In the Jewish leaders eyes, things were going from bad to worse very quickly right at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. He identifies himself as "the Son of Man," with the authority to forgive sins, which the Jewish leaders knew that only God had the authority to do. Then he eats with tax collectors and sinners. And now to top it off Jesus' disciples are not fasting:

¹⁸ Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" Mark 2:18 (NIV)

My guess is that the ones who came to Jesus and asked about his disciples who were not fasting, were disciples who were fasting, especially the disciples of the Pharisees.

¹⁹ Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. Mark 2:19-20 (NIV)

It is not just a coincidence that these two parables come after Jesus being questioned about fasting. Nothing that Jesus did during his time of ministry here on earth was by coincidence. So, to put this parable in context we need to understand the place of fasting in the Jewish people's lives. The disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees lived a lifestyle based on Old Testament law. They followed a long list of things that every Jewish person had to keep in order to have a right relationship with God. The religious leaders, the Pharisees, had enormous power which made them feel significantly superior to the common people. They were supposed to shepherd the Jews, but they actually became hard taskmasters and extremely legalistic in their style of leading.

One of the things that they forced the Jewish people to do was to fast from food one or two days a week. John's disciples were almost all from Jewish background and since they were still practicing the law, fasting was just part of that law and something they did. At the same time that he's talking to them about fasting, Jesus refers to himself as "the bridegroom" and his disciples as "guests" or "friends" of the bridegroom.

That must have been pretty puzzling to the Jewish leaders. And if that wasn't puzzling itself, then he gives them the parables:

²¹ "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. ²² And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins."

Mark 2:21-22 (NIV)

Now, not only was that puzzling to the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day, that is puzzling to me today, if it wasn't for some others to help me. While there are some subjects that I might be somewhat intelligent on, there are others which I am completely ignorant. One of those is sewing. I have no idea what happens when you try and so any type of cloth on to another type of cloth because I have never tried it. And learning how to do it is just not on my bucket list ☺! So I need to rely on the experience and intelligence of others when it comes to sewing. I am told that if you tried to sew a new, unshrunk piece of cloth to patch up an old garment, the new patch would soon pull away, causing the garment to further tear. I am told that the same thing happens if you use an old piece of material to patch up a tear on a new garment. The lesson is that you can only patch like-to-like cloth, or the repair will not last.

Well, Jesus was not giving the disciples a sewing lesson. He was giving them a much more important lesson about the laws of God. "Laws of God" as opposed to "the Law of God." What Jesus was telling the disciples is that you can only add an old principle to an old law and you can only add a new principle to a new law.

The old garment represents the Old Testament law, based on the old covenant. The new garment represents the New Testament of grace that Jesus was about to establish by his substitutionary death on the cross. You see, God had entered into a covenant with his people, the Israelites, and the Old Testament covenant was that God's people needed to keep his law, completely, and if they didn't then their sin was punishable by death. God took covenants back then, and he still does today, very seriously. In God's eyes a covenant cannot be dissolved.

The only way that God's old covenant with his people could be replaced by a new covenant is if the old one was fully met by God himself, and that is what happened with Jesus' death on the cross. Jesus, who was God veiled in human flesh, totally fulfilled every single part of the old covenant law on our behalf. Jesus said in his *Sermon on the Mount*, "I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it."

On top of the Ten Commandments, the hundreds of other laws listed in the Old Testament reflect God's character and his standard of holiness. The law was holy and right, in fact it still is, but it was impossible for anyone on earth to perfectly and completely keep. The law tells us what to do, but in and of itself it has no life, it could not empower us to keep its rigid demands.

So, why then did God give the law? He gave the law to humble us and to bring us to our knees so that we would call out and turn to Him. He wants us to know that we cannot accomplish this by our own power, that every single one of us needs a Savior to come and save us from our sinful nature. That Savior is Jesus Christ.

The problem with the Israelites, especially their leaders, is that they compared their standard of holiness to those around them, and they became prideful when they saw that their behavior was better than others in certain matters. We tend to do the same (it's part of our sinful human nature); we compare ourselves with other people and assume that we are okay with God because we're not as bad as the others. Yes, I have some sin problems, but they're not like theirs! The problem with that is that God doesn't compare us to others. God only compares us to His goodness and His holiness and His yardstick is the only one to use. And when we use God's yardstick nobody measures us.

No one but God himself can keep the law perfectly. When the time was right, God sent his son to keep the law for us. Jesus fulfilled the law perfectly while he was here on earth and then he died on the cross to take away the penalty for all the times that we break the law, for all those who believe in Jesus and put their faith in Him as Savior and Lord. Through our faith in Jesus we are declared totally righteous before God. When God looks at us, he sees Jesus. He no longer sees us as sinners.

The old garment was faulty; it had a tear in it. In other words, the old law was faulty; it was powerless to change people – it couldn't fix the disease of sin. It could only reveal sin. No one can patch the old tear with a new law or a new piece of cloth that hasn't been shrunk.

The only workable solution was for the old law to be done away with and a brand new system to replace it. That system is the grace of Jesus dying on the cross for us. It is only God's grace through Jesus Christ that has the power to fix the tear. Going around in this life trying to fix the tear will keep you broken. You will live with guilt, condemnation, shame.

"Mixing the law and grace is an abomination to Jesus and an insult to his work on the cross."

Matthew Payne, *The Parables of Jesus Made Simple*

No one can walk in lasting freedom from sin when he or she mixes the old covenant of Law with the new covenant of Grace. I know because for many years I tried to do just that. Occasionally I still find myself slipping back.

That what Paul in the Book of Galatians was warning the early Christians about:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— 7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.

Galatians 1:6-7 (NIV)

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

² Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

⁷ You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? ⁸ That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.

Galatians 5:1-8 (NIV)

The second parable that Jesus gives, the parable of new wine into old wineskins, immediately follows the one on new cloth on and old garment in all three of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark & Luke. It conveys the same biblical truth that Jesus is trying to convey in the previous one with Jesus building on that truth.

Wine is mentioned several times in Jesus' ministry. The first miracle that Jesus performed was when he turned plain, unclean, water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. Jesus referring to wine in one of his first parables, not too long after his miracle of turning the water into wine, is once again probably not just a coincidence.

At the end of the wedding feast, which in Jesus' day a wedding feast for Jewish people lasted about a week, most of the people would have been drunk on drinking cheap, watered down wine. Fortunately they had no cars to get into and drive home each night. No host in their right mind would have served the most expensive, choice wine for an entire week.

When the host of the wedding feast tasted the special new wine that Jesus had made he discovered it was the best wine and he took the bridegroom aside and he wondered why he had saved the best wine, the choice wine for last. The best wine, the choice wine, represents God's New Covenant of Grace brought forth in Jesus Christ.

As a believer in Jesus Christ the only way your life's wineskin is going to burst and be destroyed is if you mix the new wine, the new covenant teaching of Jesus, with the old covenant law. You see, both parables go hand in hand; both carry the warning not to mix together the new and the old covenants of the law.

The Biblical Truth of the Parable of the New Cloth and New Wine:

One cannot mix the Old Covenant of Law, which came through Moses, with the New Covenant of Grace which comes through Jesus Christ.

The primary purpose of the law was, and is, to reveal our sin. We need to be careful here. Some of the law has been abolished through Jesus' death on the cross, especially that which came through Moses – all the sacrifices and ordinances, the dietary and dress restrictions, specific days of fasting. But not all of God's Law has been abolished – like the 10 Commandments, which came through the hand of God himself.

But none of it has the power to save, because none of us can keep any of it perfectly!

Grace is God's unmerited favor which he bestows upon all those who acknowledge their own sinfulness, repent and put their faith and trust in Jesus for salvation. Just because we are not under the law, but under grace, doesn't mean we are free to break the law. Before, it was out of fear of God, now it is out of love of God, for Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15) and "no one, whom makes a practice of sinning abides in Him" (1 John 3).

Let us Pray:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound! Yes, Lord, your grace is truly amazing. So amazing that it is often hard for us humans to take it in, to fully understand that we are not saved by anything that we have ever done, or could ever do, but only by what you have chosen to do for us through the gift of your son. Forgive us for the times when we have tried to combine the two – the Old Covenant of Law with your New Covenant of Grace – the new cloth with the old garment, the new wine with the old wineskin.

Set us free to live by your grace, in your grace, and for your grace, for ourselves and for the lives of others.

In Jesus' Name, How Sweet the Sound, we pray, Amen!